

Sustainable Careers and Flourishing Organizations

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1. Introduction

The idea of this Special Issue emerged within the last two years that (exclusively focusing on the impact of the pandemic on working life) will pass to history as one of the most complex times for individuals and organizations.

Accordingly, since 2016, the Guest Editors of the present Special Issue, as well as some of the authors who contributed to the discussion which is presented above, are members of a national academic network, born within the Italian Association of Psychology, called Work in Progress (WIP), whose aim is to produce empirical evidence and theoretical insights on the huge changes that have transpired the labor market lately and that have radically transformed organizational processes, human resource management practices, as well as the meaning individuals attach to work and to career in their life (Available online: <https://aipass.org/node/11613> (accessed on 15 July 2022)).

Yet, the attention on the change in career paradigms specifically focused on by this network was justified by a rich international literature in the field of Work and Organizational Psychology (WOP) that has proliferated within the last decades. In light of the economic and social transformations occurring in the labor market, careers have been redefined, alternatively using labels like protean [1], boundaryless [2], and customized [3]—just to quote a few of them—consequently pointing out the need to re-read the psychological contract binding individuals to organizations. Most recently, in light of the cultural changes that are a sign of these current times, authoritative scholars have proposed considering career as a shared responsibility between employers and employees and therefore coined the notion of sustainable careers to better underline the individual and organizational levels implied in post-modern career development and management trajectories [4,5]. In this vein, sustainable careers are considered dynamic and flexible paths, featured by continuous learning, periodic renewal, employability, and a harmonious fit with personal skills, interests, and values. Accordingly, to be effective, this “self-directed” management of one’s own professional route cannot be realized without the support of organizations that are expected to provide opportunities to individuals to capitalize their human potential, creating consequently valuable advantage for them.

Yet, within this mutually profitable perspective, career is defined as a cycle of events and decisions that implies a constant interaction between personal and external factors [6,7]. More specifically, as suggested by the literature, this cycle of events is shaped according to four key elements concurring to describe sustainability in career: time, social space, agency, and meaning. Being a dynamic cycle of events and decisions, career moves in time and space across the lifespan, evolving itself along with personal priorities, professional ambitions, career goals, as well as with the opportunities provided by the labor market and with family and private life needs and demands. This evolution is guided by personal agency because a sustainable career management requires individuals to be proactive and to continuously adjust to events and changes, and by meaning, that is a personal awareness about what matters in life and what is important when engaging in the career decision-making process and when evaluating one’s own career success and satisfaction.



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In view of the above, meaningful indicators of successful sustainable careers are happiness, health, and productivity.

Sharing this perspective, careers cannot be simply considered “a private affair”, a personal responsibility of workers; rather, they need to be considered into a wider framework, involving multiple stakeholders (i.e., employers and organizations) that concur to create the conditions for a sustainable performance [8].

The dual perspective considering sustainable careers as a construction made by multiple collaborative efforts (individual and organizational ones) is complemented with the recent attention some scholars and practitioners are giving to positive organizing and flourishing organizations as people-based management practices. Drawing on the Positive Organizational Behavior framework [9–11] and supported by some of the most recent scientific developments in the field [12–15], this stream of research is mainly aimed at underlining the interdependent relationship between individuals and organizations and the mutual benefit that could derive from a sustainable management of people in organizations. Indeed, flourishing organizations are those supporting a positive organizing, that is, a generative dynamic in and of organizations enabling individuals and groups to become creative, resilient, and effective as well, consequently bringing competitive advantage to organizations. Therefore, a premise is that flourishing organizations are those where individuals are supported, involved, are given the opportunity to learn and to be trained, to follow their ambitions, and to use their skills, actively developing their sustainable career path. In this perspective, it is critical to focus on the inspiring, motivating, and energizing forces of people, as they potentially are the main drivers of organizational development, as well as on the organizational conditions that allow people to implement positive behaviors for themselves and for the organization [16]. Concretely, different (good) management practices (e.g., talent acquisition, onboarding, socialization, communication, training and development, career management) encompassed under the wide umbrella covering the notion of ‘flourishing organizations’ concur to this aim as productive tools of sustainability in organizations. According to this view, a flourishing organization cultivates flourishing human resources by creating sustainable performance [17].

Based on these premises, the Special Issue presented in this editorial mainly aimed to explore the role of both organizational conditions and positively oriented human resources and capabilities of employees that can enhance workplace wellbeing and organizational performance, even in times of great change and uncertainty as the current ones [18]. Accordingly, the global outbreak of the pandemic at the beginning of 2020 has accelerated processes that were already underway (e.g., the digitalization of work, a new re-organization of time and space, new employment relationships, new human resource practices) and that were already challenging human resources. Therefore, the pandemic gave us the opportunity to better focus the needs of individuals and organizations and to provide new insights in theory development and practice.

2. The Contributions to the Special Issue ‘Sustainable Careers and Flourishing Organizations’

In view of the above, the collection of contributions presented above focused on the role of both the organizational conditions (e.g., specific Human Resources Management Practices, Career Management initiatives, Work/Life balance programs, etc.) and personal resources (in terms of personality traits, employability, psychological capital, career growth, etc.) that can make current workplaces healthy, productive, and sustainable contexts.

The contributions focused on the individual side of sustainable careers, specifically considered young people (newcomers, university students, job seekers) as a target. The qualitative ethnographic study by contribution 1 (see Appendix A) analyzed the impact of digital onboarding of newcomers, considering the relevance of socialization processes for a positive adjustment to the organizational culture and, consequently, for a successful Person/Organization fit. The qualitative data collected by the authors shed light on the need to re-structure a most “traditional” way of managing people and processes in light

of the changing contexts of work that impose a different consideration of time, space, and relationships. Accordingly, onboarding is one of the most important HRM practices, linked to socialization and transition and responsible for shaping the psychological contract between employers and employees, which in turn could contribute to reciprocally define the conditions for sustainable and flourishing performance.

The (future) worker's perspective was also analyzed by two studies, contribution 2 and contribution 3, focusing on perceived employability as a meaningful correlate of sustainable careers. Both underlined the important role played by socialization agencies, such as the University and the Employment Agency, in developing employability through organizational commitment and reputation (as in the case of contribution 2) and through social support (contribution 3). Moreover, both papers showed the catalyst role played by these agencies in fostering personal resources: career ambition (in contribution 2) and positivity (in contribution 3).

Bridging the worker's perspective on sustainable career to the organizational one, the review by contribution 4 gave a useful theoretical panorama on interventions studies to foster sustainable employability, namely, interventions addressed to develop workers' skills and ability to boost productivity, health, and valuable work in the long term. On the other hand, contribution 5 provided a rich systematic review on the notion of personal energy at work, showing that energy depends on the workplace context challenges and opportunities, on the personal characteristics of employees, and on the processes of strain and recovery.

In the same line, contribution 6 investigated another meaningful aspect featuring positive organizing, which is flow at work, meant as a mental state of true engagement and absorption which is generally related to happiness and productivity. Drawing on the Job Demands/Resources Model, this study investigated how a proactive personality could predict flow at work via job crafting and work engagement. Likewise, the study described in contribution 7 found that personal energy at work is related to the outcomes of health, absenteeism, and productivity. Contribution 8 reported a study conducted in the hospitality sector contributed to reflect on the role played by the management in supporting effective stress coping strategies to maintain a sustainable hotel work force.

Therefore, sustainability and flourishing emerged as a shared responsibility, and the results coming from the other studies encompassed in the collection offered several insights to practitioners about how to manage people effectively. In this vein, Human Resource Management Practices Perceptions were proven to be strongly associated with talent retention and commitment (contribution 9), but also positively related to employability, objective career success (contribution 10), and extra-role behaviors (contribution 11). The pivotal role played by people management practices was found to increase work engagement if mediated by opportunities to learn at work (contribution 12) and by individual adaptability (contribution 13), finally impacting on intention to quit (contribution 14).

Accordingly, the studies presented above converged on a similar conclusion supporting the dual perspective described at the beginning of the editorial: the label 'sustainable' in the workplace has been variably adopted to refer to the workforce [19], to individual career [7], to organizational development [20], and, finally, also to HRM practices [21]. However, the empirical evidence shown in the Special Issue underline that it could be a keyword inspiring a renewal of the traditional management practices and of the personal approach to work and career. Flourishing in this sense is the goal that both people and organizations could attain if mutually engaged in defining and pursuing interdependent objectives.

Finally, results coming from the studies presented in the Special Issue pave the way for some new insights both with theoretical and practical implications.

First, they may contribute to an integration between the organizational (i.e., HRM practices, Career Management initiatives) and the personal perspective (i.e., energy, proactivity, adaptability, engagement, employability, career ambition) on sustainability and flourishing. As a matter of fact, the evidence reported clearly contributed to point out that flow at work,

as well as objective career success, may depend on both organizational and individual factors. Further studies may clarify the size of these effects and establish the weight of each indicator.

Second, findings may provide a new lens to researchers and practitioners to understand the “great resignation” phenomenon, if a common conclusion that could be drawn is the acknowledgement of the importance of onboarding, talent retention, commitment, and generally of HR interventions for the promotion of energy at work and engagement that in turn could reduce turnover intention.

Finally, results contributed to highlight the link between Sustainable Careers and Flourishing Organizations. There is no organizational growth without employees’ growth. On the contrary, when an organization invests in their own workforce, i.e., through HRM practices, this could translate into positive organizational behaviors that may translate into personal, group, and organizational wellbeing as well.

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Appendix A. List of Contributions

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